

Assimilating New People into the Church

By David D. Durey

The Problem of Assimilation

As early as the 1960s Earl Waldrup addressed the challenge of assimilation by dramatizing the loss of Southern Baptist members to active and vital relationship with the church. “The annual loss of active members is greater than the number of men which American Armed Forces have lost killed in battle in all the wars of this century. One out of every two persons on our church rolls is lost to kingdom service through his church. One out of every two persons bears a negative witness to the world as to the relevance of a vital church relationship” (3). Another denominational study found that over 75 percent of church attenders who became inactive did so because they did not feel a sense of belonging (Shelley 3).

Not only is membership dropout an issue in the North American church, so is the assimilation of newcomers. Herb Miller states that in the average congregation in America, only 12 percent of first-time visitors return the following Sunday and eventually become members. A few congregations have 20 or 25 percent retention but rarely would any church surpass 30 percent (Magnetic 1). In “The Teflon Church,” John Savage describes the challenge of assimilation:

Assimilating someone into the life of the church is different than helping them become a member. Rounding up bodies and getting them to join the church doesn’t finish the task. People who join a church may well drop out a few months later. The church needs to incorporate them into the life, the emotion, and the ministry of the congregation. People need to become a part of the church body rather than be merely attached to it (31).

“Assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church” (Warren 309). The first issue is getting the attention of those you wish to reach so that they choose to visit your church. Once they have visited, the issue is follow-up that is effective in getting them to return on a regular basis. Then the issue is clearly and convincingly communicating the gospel so that they can make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. After making a commitment to Christ and the church, the new believer needs to grow in vital relationship with Christ as a disciple and in fellowship with other Christians. The final step of assimilation is that every Christian needs to take up the responsibility and stewardship of personal ministry.

Many churches experience some success in one or more of these assimilation steps but fail in the others. Some churches experience a degree of success but still lose far more people than they assimilate into their local body. Most churches, however, reach few, if any unchurched people. In North America, over the past several decades,

the church has generally failed at retaining its members, failed at reaching the unchurched, and it has failed to assimilate those few that it has evangelized.

Questions Concerning Assimilation

How can a congregation retain the active involvement of its members? How can it increase the number of first-time visitors who become incorporated into the life of the church? And how can unchurched people be attracted and assimilated? These are the representative questions that have prompted literature on the subject of assimilation. One of the first books exclusively addressing the issue was Lyle Schaller's Assimilating New Members, which was published in 1978. His central thesis for the book was that "it is un-Christian for a congregation to seek new members unless it is also willing and able to accept them into that called-out community" (128). Schaller is truly concerned about assimilating people after they have been evangelized.

Assimilation Defined

Assimilation is a relatively new term in church language but in reality it is as old as when the church was born on Pentecost and 3000 people were added in one day (Acts 2:41). In spite of the wonderful fellowship enjoyed by the thousands of new believers in Jerusalem the difficulties associated with assimilation were made evident when complaints arose among the Hellenistic Jews regarding the daily distribution of food to their widows (Acts 6:1-6). Even more profound was the issue of assimilating Gentiles into what began as a Jewish church (Acts 15:28-29).

Definitions and terms for assimilation vary. Some use the word "incorporation" as a synonym for assimilation (Anderson 135; Arn 137; Dennison Incorporation 8). Elmer Towns prefers the term "bonding" to joining or assimilating (228). Ron Jenson and Jim Stevens refer to it as "absorption." They define absorption as "the process by which people are taken into the life of the church and by which a strong sense of identity and belonging develops" (138). This process can often be assessed by what takes place during the "length of time between the first visit and the application for membership and complete commitment to the church" (139). Rick Warren says that, "assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church" (Purpose 309). Others define assimilation as feeling "part of the congregation," belonging, feeling connected, or demonstrating a sense of ownership with comments like, "this is my church," or "he is my pastor" (Lobs 17-18). In New Member Assimilation, Joel Heck states that to assimilate means "to make similar." "We assimilate people when we help them to acquire similar knowledge about our Christian beliefs and our congregation, similar attitudes towards Christ and His church, similar feelings of belonging, and similar patterns of behavior" (12).

Characteristics of an Assimilated Person

What are the characteristics of someone who has been assimilated into the life of a local church? Win and Charles Arn offer nine characteristics of an incorporated member, which parallel Bob Logan's assimilation continuum:

1. Identifies with the goals of the church.
2. Attends worship services regularly.
3. Experiences spiritual growth and progress.
4. Becomes a member of the Body.
5. Has 5-10 new friends in the church.
6. Has an appropriate task or role that matches spiritual giftedness.
7. Is involved in meaningful fellowship in a small group.
8. Regularly tithes to the church.
9. Participates in the great commission by spreading the Good News to friends and relatives (Arn 49-55; Beyond 109).

Heck's listing represents a more traditional American Protestant church ministry. He suggests that the following characteristics may be considered a description of an active church member, a disciple of Christ and a Christian. He states that an assimilated member will possess most if not all of these:

1. Identifies with the goals of the church.
2. Is regular in worship attendance and in attendance at special services (Hebrews 10:25).
3. Attends Communion and Sunday school regularly and has Bible reading and family devotions in the home (Acts 2:42).
4. Attends some special functions of the congregation such as council meetings, church picnics, special workshops, and midweek services.
5. Is growing spiritually (2 Peter 3:18).
6. Has affiliated with the congregation.
7. Has six or more friends in the church.
8. Has a task or role that is appropriate for his or her spiritual gift(s) (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Peter 4:10-11).
9. Is involved in a fellowship group (Acts 2:42).
10. Gives regularly and generously (1 Corinthians 16:2).
11. Tells others about the Lord and His church (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8) (Heck 54-55).

Assimilation Processes

Each local congregation will need to determine its characteristics of assimilation and put in place a system or process that helps newcomers reach those objectives. There is no assimilation plan that will fit every church. Though churches vary in size, worship style, and location, the stages that a newcomer transitions through in the process of assimilation often follow a general pattern:

1. Attraction/recruitment: the new person is drawn to the church.
2. Testing: the new person attends for the first time.
3. Returning/affiliating: the new person revisits and begins to participate.

4. Joining: the new person takes official steps to become a member.
5. Going deeper: the new member identifies gifts and talents and finds a meaningful place of service.
6. Being sent: the new member is enlisted in outreach ministries (Oswald 104-109).

Many congregations have not been intentional in their efforts to incorporate new people. Roy Oswald and Speed Leas studied sixteen growing churches of various sizes located in stable communities in two metropolitan areas in the eastern United States. These churches, which included Lutheran, United Methodist, Unitarian, Episcopal, and Presbyterian, had almost no formal assimilation systems (16-17). Though this has been typical of mainline churches in recent years, Loren Mead warns that the future demands a new approach. "Congregations in the church of the future will have to have strong entry processes, assuming very little previous knowledge or experience of religion or Christianity. Such congregations will have to set aside the time and energy to put first class attention on this need, year after year after year" (51).

Perhaps the assimilation model that is most widely known at present is the baseball diamond which has been popularized by Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church in southern California. The four bases of the baseball diamond represent four stages of commitment in what he calls the life development process. The first base represents leading people to faith in Christ and a commitment to church membership. Second base represents growing toward spiritual maturity. Third base represents equipping and mobilizing people for ministry. And home base represents a commitment to witnessing for Christ and sharing in his worldwide mission (Warren Purpose 144). Denominational leaders have adapted these basic stages as have many local congregations who are successfully reaching and assimilating unchurched people (Garlow Team 15; Gospel 3; Hornsby 4; Martin Issachar 125-128; Wright 74-78).

John Wesley provides a positive example of the assimilation process from church history. Wesley's genius lay in his ability to organize seekers and converts into vital discipleship groups called societies, classes, and bands. Each group represented a systematic, progressive step in spiritual maturity. In order to join the Methodist movement a person was first involved for three months in a small group that taught the basics of the faith and discipleship. Then, if the person was willing to submit to accountability and discipline of the cell (which met weekly), one could be recommended for membership. Continued involvement was evaluated quarterly (Slaughter 73-74).

Newcomer Attraction

Church is no longer at or near the center of our social life; we are living in a secular culture. We can no longer approach secular people with the assumption that they have any Christian background or spiritual memories from church. We must meet them where they are and guide them step by step. Or, as George Hunter writes in How to Reach Secular People, "We must first plow, seed, and water the fields before we can reasonably expect to gather harvests" (36). Research, as well as successful models of evangelistic outreach, demonstrate that people adopt new truth, practice, or life-styles

through processes or stages. Hunter labels this the “adoption process.” This process delineates six stages people experience in adopting Christianity: 1) awareness; 2) relevance; 3) interest; 4) trial; 5) adoption; and 6) reinforcement (75-77). So how does the church attract secular people?

David Burnett offers suggestions to Christians who want to communicate the gospel effectively to those from different cultures. First, one must gain an understanding of the other culture and worldview. There needs to be an attitude of empathy where there is an appreciation of the other culture’s perspective without condemnation. Empathy leads to a personal identification with the other person. Secondly, effective communication of the gospel must begin where the people are. It is important to begin by sharing the parts of the gospel story that are readily understood and significantly touch the lives of those who are willing to listen. Often, this is done by identifying a felt need of the society or individual. Thirdly, one must continually adapt the message to the hearers. “The process of communication must work from within the existing cultural forms for them to be meaningful and relevant for the people . . . God is willing to accept people at the point where they are, with the understanding that they have, and transform those concepts” (244-245).

Hunter studied eight “Apostolic Congregations” from various denominations and geographic settings in North America and compiled a list of ten ways that these churches seek to communicate the gospel. 1) They often begin with “active listening.” 2) They begin where the people are. 3) They teach “Christianity 101.” 4) They introduce the Bible in a simple way by emphasizing the gospels. 5) They practice the “ministry of dialogue,” (caring, intelligent conversation). 6) They cooperate with the principle of “cumulative effect.” They don’t expect a non-Christian to understand the message from one exposure. 7) They practice the principle of “creative redundancy.” They communicate the message many times, but in different ways. 8) They assimilate seekers before they are believers. 9) They permit Christianity to become “contagious.” They provide multiple opportunities for secular people to “catch” the faith in the context of the Church. 10) They invite an “experiment of faith.” This means living for a time as though Christianity is true, doing things Christians do in order to discover for oneself whether Christianity is “self-authenticating” (Unchurched 163-167).

A Healthy Climate

These Apostolic Churches illustrate the importance of maintaining a healthy climate in the church (Jenson 97; Logan Beyond 110; Macchia 135). “Incorporation of newcomers may be one of the most identifiable and measurable signs of health in a church. Healthy churches assimilate new people into the life and leadership of the congregation” (Anderson 135). There are three climate factors that relate to attraction. First, growing congregations had a positive personality that demonstrated itself in the church’s energy, belief in inclusion, and sense of having a unique identity. The second factor was a low level of conflict and disunity and a high degree of good feeling among the members. Finally, the Pastor had the ability to generate enthusiasm (Oswald 17, 25-28).

Christian Schwarz has identified eight qualities essential for healthy churches. These qualities are 1) empowered leadership, 2) gift-oriented ministry, 3) passionate spirituality, 4) functional structures, 5) inspiring worship service, 6) holistic small groups, 7) need-oriented evangelism, and 8) loving relationships (15-36). Schwarz states that no quality can be missing and that if every quality is sufficiently strong (65% or higher), the church will experience natural and healthy growth. Schwarz calls this the “65 hypothesis.” This hypothesis states that “whenever all eight values climb to 65, the statistical probability that the church is growing is 99.4 percent” (40).

Need-Meeting Ministries

“What really attracts large numbers of unchurched people is changed lives—a lot of changed lives. People want to go where lives are being changed, where hurts are being healed, and where hope is being restored” (Warren Purpose 247). Jesus attracted crowds and established an open door for ministry by meeting the felt needs of the people (Warren Purpose 219). This is “presence evangelism.” Through need-meeting ministries the unchurched sense the warmth and acceptance of Christianity (McIntosh Finding 25; Comiskey Explosion 91-94). Pastor Steve Sjogren of Vineyard Community Church of Cincinnati presents a refreshingly simple but effective approach to evangelism. He calls it “servant evangelism.” He defines it as follows: “demonstrating the kindness of God by offering to do some act of humble service with no strings attached”(17-18). He states that servant evangelism is effective in the following sequence: deeds of love before words of love plus adequate time (22-24). Evangelism is not a one-time event, it is a process. People need to be touched by the love of Christ several times in order to soften their hearts. Sjogren states that Christians and non-Christians have one thing in common, they both hate the traditional confrontational style of evangelism. Servant evangelism, however, is easy for the majority of Christians to do and it is a delight to those non-Christians who receive the acts of love (50).

Personal Invitations

Lutheran Church historian Martin Marty says that one word defines the difference between churches that grow and those that don’t. When a church isn’t growing, its members are not “inviting.” “Invitations are the way churches open their doors” (Miller Magnetic 31-32). Many people think of assimilation simply in terms of getting the unchurched Christian fully church. Yet Logan suggests that assimilation may be a valuable tool in bringing non-Christians to a point of commitment. “Involve someone in your church and give him ownership, and his heart will follow. Assimilation precedes commitment (Beyond 107). In the ministry of attracting first-time worshipers, a personal invitation from a friend or family member is by far the single most effective method. Consider the research conducted by Church Growth, Inc. of Monrovia, California. Over forty-two thousand laypersons were asked, “What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and your church? Responses included the following:

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| 1. | A "special need" brought them. | 1-2% |
| 2. | They just "walked in." | 2-3% |
| 3. | Some listed the "pastor." | 5-6% |
| 4. | Some indicated "visitation." | 1-2% |
| 5. | Some said the "Sunday school." | 4-5% |
| 6. | An "evangelistic crusade or television show. | ½% |
| 7. | A church "program" attracted them. | 2-3% |
| 8. | A "friend/relative" | 75-90% (Arn 45-46) |

George Barna studied the success stories of two dozen churches from around the nation that he labeled "user-friendly" churches (16). In these churches, members realized that inviting people to church was just part of their responsibility. They also were expected to accompany their guests to the church activity. Then they were to provide the follow-up. "It was not the task of a 'visitation team' or an 'evangelism team' to make the visitor feel welcome." It was the responsibility of the person who invited to provide the "on-site hospitality" and the "post-visit debriefing" (100).

Even though personal invitations are the most effect, nonpersonal methods of attraction should be used as supplements, but never as substitutes. An attractive, visible building and sign are important. Use of the Yellow Pages, radio, television, newspaper and direct mail advertising cannot replace personal invitations but it can support them (Miller Magnetic 40-43).

Seeker-Sensitive Churches

Even churches that are presenting seeker-sensitive services succeed primarily because of personal invitations. Pastor James Emery White states that having a seeker-service is not what attracts a secular person even though it is designed for seekers. Rather, what attracts them is a personal invitation from a friend. The seeker-targeted ministries enable a Christian to invite his or her non-Christian friend to explore the faith in a way that is relevant and comfortable. The dilemma is that Christians in most churches intuitively know that their non-Christian friends would not understand or enjoy the worship services that are provided because they have not been designed with seekers in mind (50).

Seeker churches often "target" the specific type of person they are trying to reach. Warren states, "No single church can possibly reach everyone. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people" (156). Define your target group geographically. What is a reasonable driving distance? Define your target group demographically by age, marital status, income, education, and occupations. Define your target group culturally (lifestyle, mind-set) and by spiritual backgrounds (161-168). Once you have collected all the information on your target community, create a composite profile of the typical unchurched person you are trying to reach and make that profile into a mythical person such as "Saddleback Sam" or "Unchurched Harry" (Warren Purpose 170; Towns 46). You will best reach those you most easily relate to. "Explosive growth occurs when the type of people in the community match the type of people that are

already in the church and they both match the type of person the pastor is.” Like it or not, “you will attract who you are, not who you want” (Warren Purpose 175-177).

Newcomer Welcome and Follow-up

Hospitality and Welcome

In an article entitled, “Get Ready For Company,” McIntosh projects that a church needs 4-5% of its worship attendance to be first-time visitors before significant growth will take place. The importance of getting ready for guests is illustrated by the fact that they form an opinion of the church within minutes or even seconds of entering the front door (1). In “How to be a Friendly Church,” McIntosh suggests that seven key areas be prepared for company:

1. Beautify your property.
2. Upgrade your childcare.
3. Provide clear directions throughout your facility.
4. Welcome guests graciously.
5. Enhance your worship service.
6. Preach relational messages that uplift.
7. Follow-up appropriately (1-2).

McIntosh also suggests recruiting friendly ushers, greeters, and parking attendants who will project enthusiasm, courtesy, and pride to your guests. He also suggests teaching members to follow the “10 Foot Rule” and the “Just Say Hi Policy.” Instruct them that “whenever they come within 10 feet of a person they don’t know to just say hi” (1).

Calvin Ratz suggests that an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance is expressed most effectively by people who hold no official position. This is because a guest is receiving a welcome from someone they didn’t expect in a place where they didn’t expect it. Welcome shouldn’t just happen at the door; it’s something everyone should be doing throughout the building (43).

In his book How to Build a Magnetic Church, Miller offers several suggestions for creating a friendly climate that will attract and welcome newcomers to the church:

1. The senior pastor must be a constant model of warmth.
2. Organize an effective team of greeters.
3. Encourage “extroversion in the pews.” Instruct lay leaders to assume responsibility for those seated around them. Have them welcome and get acquainted with any visitors. They can serve as “secret hosts” who befriend newcomers and accompany them to a visitor welcome center or fellowship area.
4. Allow time within the worship service for the congregation to mix and meet.
5. Let people visit freely before the worship service.
6. Provide a large foyer for fellowship following the worship service.

7. Supply coffee and refreshments that will invite people to remain longer and get acquainted.
8. Provide name tags, especially for the members so that visitors will know their names.
9. Invite guests to a social event in their honor. Listen to the interests and ideas of these prospective members.
10. Provide a high quality nursery (63-69).

In the audiocassette lecture, "Assimilating Visitors into the Life of Your Church," Logan offers 12 suggestions to make a church more attractive to visitors:

1. Provide adequate parking.
2. Station attendants in the parking lot to assist visitors.
3. Clearly identify the main entrances.
4. Appoint greeters who are gifted for the task.
5. Station greeters strategically.
6. Assign welcomers to search out the visitors immediately after the service. Provide welcomers reserve seats in the back so that visitors cannot miss receiving a warm welcome. First-time visitors typically sit near the back and can easily be missed by the members who often sit closer to the front of the church.
7. Train ushers to do their job well.
8. Post signs, pointing to entrances, nursery, restrooms, etc.
9. Ask for families to invite visitors into their homes. Many unchurched people are resistant to receiving a visit in their home but are much more open to being invited to the home of a church member.
10. Ask everyone to fill out a registration card each week.
11. Assign someone to call first-time visitors.
12. Be sure that the bulletin contains enough information that a total stranger can participate in the service without embarrassment, or have the worship leader facilitate this.

Make sure that guests feel welcomed, not embarrassed; included, not singled out; and comfortable, not out of place (Smith 47). As Barna states, "Successful churches did not humiliate visitors" (177). Research indicates that new believers will drop out of the church if they don't connect with a group within two weeks. Therefore, Towns emphasizes what he calls the "Law of Seven Touches." When a church makes seven immediate and meaningful contacts with guests they tend to return to the church and associate with it. This law corresponds to another, "The Law of Three Hearings," which states that guests are more likely to bond with a local church if they have attended three or four times. Both laws are based on someone in the church establishing a relationship with the newcomer (235-236).

The following "to do list" will help make these unchurched visitors feel comfortable: reserve the best parking for them; station greeters outside your building;

set up information tables at your entrances; place directional signs everywhere, have music playing when people enter your building; allow visitors to remain anonymous; have everyone fill out a registration card; offer a relaxed public welcome to visitors; begin and end each service with people greeting each other; and offer refreshments to guests (Warren Purpose 257-263).

Visitor Follow-up

What kind of follow-up should a local congregation use to insure the greatest possibility for a return visit? A welcome letter from the pastor is good and a phone call helps. But Miller states that neither can substitute for an immediate, personal visit. "When laypersons make fifteen-minute visits to the homes of first-time worship visitors within thirty-six hours, 85 percent of them return the following week." The number drops to 60 percent when visited within seventy-two hours and 15 percent when visited a week later. If a pastor makes the visit, rather than a layperson, each percentage is cut in half. Different visitors are looking for slightly different qualities in a church home. However, every visitor seeks active acceptance. Everyone wants to attend a church in which people care about them personally (Magnetic 72-73). Effective visitor follow-up focuses on building relationships (McIntosh Exodus 165).

Congregations using personal follow-up visits prefer not to call for an appointment, instead, they just drop by. The visits last no longer than fifteen minutes. Their purpose is to 1) get acquainted, 2) answer any questions that they have about the church, 3) learn about their religious needs, 4) leave information describing the church, and 5) invite them back (Miller Magnetic 75-76).

Pastor Merle Mees uses a "Rapid Response Team" which delivers to the visitor's door a personal note and some cookies immediately following the morning worship even before they arrive home. Included is a personal letter from the pastor along with information on the church, plus any specific information they requested and a First Impression Survey on a postage-paid, self-addressed card which states, "Westerns Hills wants to serve you better, so would you please give us your opinion? What did you notice first? What did you like best? What did you like least? Thanks for your input!" About 50 percent of the cards are returned (Appel 55).

Pastor Jim Tomberlin offers several creative ideas for high quality welcoming and follow-up of guests. Visitors entering the church find a Welcome Center staffed by friendly, helpful volunteers who answer questions and give directions. The Welcome Center also has plenty of literature explaining each of the church's ministries. As a special gift, the church provides complimentary cappuccino, latte, and donuts for guests. For visitor follow-up, the church delivers "love loaves" (freshly baked bread) to the home of those who filled out a guest card. Welcome Callers also phone guests following their visit, thanking them for attending and offering to answer any of their questions. In the follow-up welcome letter, guests are invited to a Newcomers' Desert where they can meet the pastoral staff and spouses. The church also offers a class for newcomers called Discovery Class (Appel 56).

Sponsors

Ernest Thomas proposes that, “Sponsors, or Shepherds, are the best single assurance of good assimilation for those received into the Christian fellowship” (19). A sponsorship program involves assigning a member family with a new member family for three months to a year. During that time the long-term member family will pray for the new family, personally get acquainted and seek to involve them in congregational activities (Heck 42; Thomas Ways 19). On the audiocassette, “Assimilating Visitors into the Life of Your Church,” Logan explains that sponsors need to be positive people who can help newcomers develop relationships, provide information, and make introductions. They don’t have to personally provide the long-term relationships, rather they connect members and newcomers.

Church Size and Tracking

In creating an assimilation plan experts remind pastors to tailor their approach to their specific church based on two major factors, the cultural context and the size of the congregation. Many larger churches are adding assimilation pastors as part of their staff (Oswald 5-17; Martin Issachar 124, 133; Miller “Friendliness” 1-2). For any size church, however, an important part of a successful assimilation plan is to establish a system to track the participation and follow-up of newcomers during their first six months to one year (Logan Beyond 116; Martin Issachar 133; Wilkinson 54). Again, Wesley demonstrated his genius for organization by creating a simple but thorough record-keeping process that monitored the multitude of groups and the tens of thousands of individuals who had joined his Methodist societies. “The record-keeping process was an essential ingredient to the proper functioning of the group system” (Henderson 144).

Church Membership

How do you define church member? In the past the answer would include terms or categories such as baptism, confirmation, or profession of faith. Membership was seen as a destination. As we move into the 21st century Schaller identifies two extremes in defining “membership.” At one end of the spectrum are high-commitment churches that demand that high standards of belief and behavior be met in order to become a member of the “covenant community.” Some even utilize the concept of “term membership” where all memberships automatically expire at midnight on December 31 and must be renewed. At the other end of the spectrum are churches where membership is labeled a voluntary association. These congregations are filled with members who were “born” into them or who came by letter of transfer. Those who joined by profession of faith may have had to give assent to certain religious beliefs but no further commitment may ever be required of them to maintain their membership, including worship attendance. So what is the future of church membership, high-commitment or voluntary association? Schaller states that “if you count congregations, the larger parade appears to be moving toward the voluntary association end of the spectrum.” However, among younger people, the “fast-growing parade” is moving

toward a high-commitment, “covenant community” approach that makes membership more meaningful (Schaller Bridges 97-103).

Requirements for Membership

Between these two extremes, contemporary approaches to church membership vary. Some large and growing congregations have high expectations of their people but do not have membership rolls. To others, membership is synonymous with conversion and regular worship attendance. Yet, many churches today have high demands for church membership. For example, Communion Fellowship requires a six-month probation and a signed commitment form in addition to the completion of a 12-week class in the basics of Christianity and subsequently joining a small group. This congregation is an example of membership that is reviewed and renewed annually (Stutzman 158-159).

One prominent example of a 21st Century high commitment church is Saddleback Community Church. By the summer of 1999 Saddleback Community Church had a membership of over 10,000 with a weekly worship attendance of 14,000 (Warren Conference 13). The requirements for membership include, 1) attending Class 101 “Discovering Saddleback Membership,” 2) a personal profession of faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, 3) baptism by immersion as a public testimony, and 4) a signed commitment to abide by the Saddleback membership covenant (Warren Purpose 320). Warren encourages, but does not require, members to join a small group, however, the covenant includes the following:

1. I will protect the unity of my church
...By acting in love toward other members
...By refusing to gossip
...By following the leaders
2. I will share the responsibility of my church
...By praying for its growth
...By inviting the unchurched to attend
...By warmly welcoming those who visit
3. I will serve the ministry of my church
...By discovering my gifts and talents
...By being equipped to serve by my pastors
...By developing a servant’s heart
4. I will support the testimony of my church
...By attending faithfully
...By living a godly life
...By giving regularly (Warren Conference 47)

Another high commitment congregation is Ginghamburg United Methodist Church near Dayton, Ohio. This church has grown from an average of 90 to 2100 worship attenders with a 62 percent increase in the first three years of the 1990s. Many congregations today see church membership in the same context as membership in a community club or civic organization, not so at Ginghamburg. Pastor Slaughter declares, "It costs something to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It costs something to be a member of his Body" (71). When someone wants to join Ginghamburg they are asked to spend three months in a class called Vital Christianity. Any missed classes must be made up in order to join the church. Class attendance alone, however, does not insure membership. A person must also 1) demonstrate a commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ, as evidenced by lifestyle integrity, 2) accept the responsibilities and commitments of covenant membership through active giving, worship attendance, participation in a service-outreach ministry, and involvement in a small group. "Jesus is calling disciples, not institutional members" (71-72). What does an assimilated member of Ginghamburg look like? An assimilated member:

1. Has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and shows evidence of a transformed lifestyle. (values clarification)
2. Is publicly identified as a follower of Jesus. (by those outside the church)
3. Participates regularly in the celebration of corporate worship.
4. Has bought into the vision and mission of the church, as evidenced through the personal sacrifice of time, talents, and resources.
5. Practices a private devotional life through prayer, meditation, and reflection upon Scripture.
6. Has established important relationships within the Body.
7. Is functioning in a significant responsibility as it relates to Christ's mission (120).

These high-commitment congregations provide challenging models. What should responsible membership look like in the 21st century? What should be expected of people who join the church? Donald McGavran said, "A responsible member carries his or her share of the church's work—giving, worshipping, and working happily with other members." Being a "responsible member," includes 1) a relationship with Christ as Head of the Body, 2) a relationship of sharing in the life and work of the local church, 3) discovery and use of spiritual gifts in service, and 4) efforts to correct that which displeases God by bringing peace, justice, love, and brotherhood into the world (51-52). Compare McGavran's description to the following ten characteristics that Stutzman adapted from a list issued by the Institute for American Church Growth. Responsible church members:

1. Grow spiritually.
2. Are faithful in worship attendance.
3. Have many friendships in the congregation.
4. Belong to a fellowship group.

5. Identify with the body. Members should be able to say, "This is our church."
6. Have roles or tasks appropriate for their spiritual gifts.
7. Identify with the goals of the church.
8. Understand and own the mission and values of the church.
9. Are concerned about stewardship.
10. Bring other people to Christ and the church (159-160).

Membership or Newcomer Classes

Many church consultants suggest that local congregations should offer a new member orientation. It is known by a variety of names: new member orientation, new member classes, and newcomer orientation classes (Martin Issachar 121; Oswald 80; Waldrup 3; Schaller "Active" 45-46; Logan Beyond 113; Stutzman 163). The length of these classes vary from several hours on one day to one hour a week for eight or nine months. Ben Patterson offers ten weeks of classes, which may seem like a large commitment. Yet he is reminded that the pastor in the second or third century would see this as "positively superficial" compared to the early church's practice of requiring a year of instruction before baptism. The way a person enters a church or any organization greatly influences the way he or she will function. Men and women will take their commitment to Christ and the church more seriously if they have taken time to be instructed in what vital Christian faith and responsible church membership means (82-83).

What should take place in the new member's class? On the audiocassette, "Assimilating Visitors into the Life of Your Church," Logan suggests that class time be equally divided between lecture and small group discussion. For the first four weeks have participants form new small groups each week. Then, for the final four weeks ask them to form small groups that will stay together for the remainder of the class. This allows the bonding of friendships and the formation of new small groups.

There are a variety of approaches to new member classes. Yet the following list represents a reasonable consensus from the literature of which elements merit inclusion in a new member class:

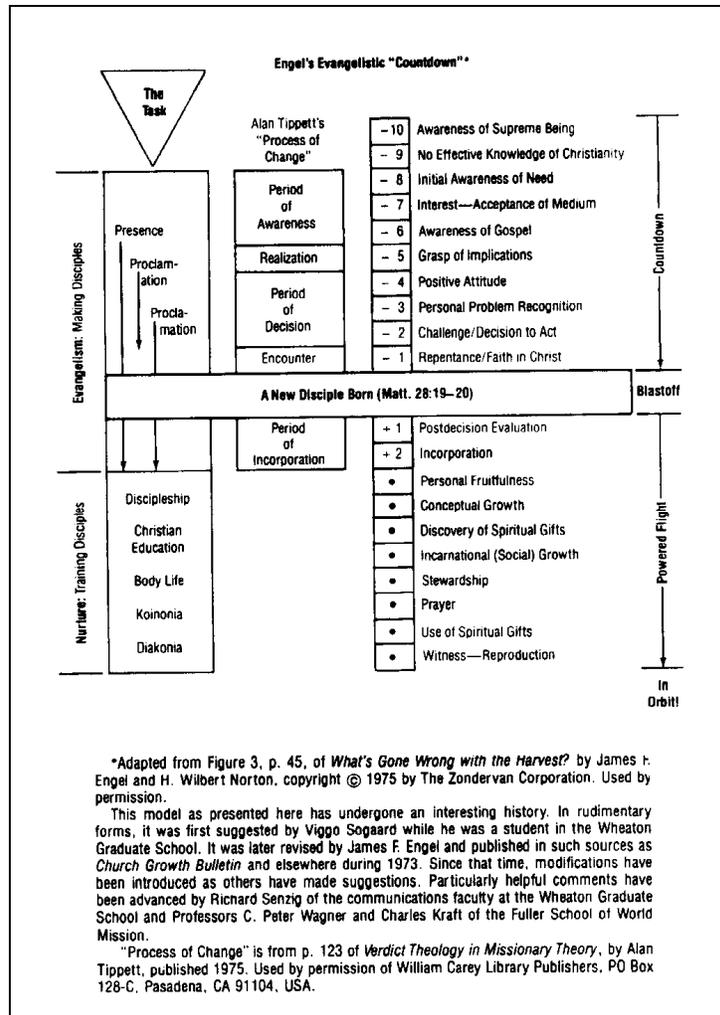
1. Get to know the pastor and staff.
2. Confirm commitment to Christ.
3. Fellowship with other newcomers.
4. Encourage spiritual growth.
5. Learn about the church—vision, values and goals.
6. Learn about basic Christian beliefs.
7. Grow spiritually.
8. Become involved in a small group.
9. Discover spiritual gifts and use them in personal ministry.
10. Decide on ministry involvement.
11. Determine financial stewardship.

12. Understand membership commitment and provide opportunity to join. (Logan Toolkit 7-12; Martin Issachar 121; Warren Purpose 318; Stutzman 164; Slaughter 139).

Discipleship

Downer and MacGregor articulate a two-phase process of discipleship. In phase 1, evangelism, they use the image of farming. The believer's involvement with the non-believer is described in three stages: cultivating, sowing, and harvesting. In phase 2, after the point of spiritual birth, the discipleship metaphor changes to parenting. The mature believer's role is that of parent/discipler and the new believer's role is that of child/disciple. Over the course of time the new believer should grow through four stages of development in the process of seeking Christlikeness (69). First, they are baby Christians. Their cry is "feed me!" Their primary needs are for information about the new life in Christ and loving care to help them survive. The second stage is the child Christian. The request now is "teach me!" The primary needs are for the basic truths of the Bible and someone to explain them. Adolescent Christians represent the third stage of growth. Their demand is "show me!" Their primary need is to find victory over sin and to develop a life of obedience to Christ. Finally, the adult Christian can say to a new disciple "follow me!" Their primary need is to use their gifts in ministry and begin training others (98). These four stages are discussed in great detail by Christopher Adsit in Personal Disciple-making and closely parallel the four stages articulated in Leroy Eims' classic, The Lost Art of Disciplemaking (Adsit 60-76; Eims 181-186).

Jenson and Stevens have combined Tippet's "Process of Change" and Engle's Evangelistic "Countdown" to demonstrate graphically that making disciples is a process that begins prior to conversion and continues far beyond (182). Many congregations and denominations have developed ministries and systems which help lead seekers to Christ and subsequently grow them up in their faith (Garlow Team 15; Gospel 3; Hornsby 4; Martin Issachar 125-128; Write 74-78; Warren Purpose 144). However, the mainline congregations studied by Oswald and Leas offered little help to new members in going deeper in their spiritual lives. Most of the congregations had no formal system or plan that could direct new members deeper into their faith, just as they had little or no plan for attracting or incorporating new people into the church. Sadly, "it seemed that all formal assimilation efforts ended once people officially joined the church" (69).



Making Disciples: Evangelism

Too often evangelism has been equated with “decision making” rather than “disciple making;” however, evangelism has only been accomplished when disciples are made (Arn 8-35; Logan Beyond 103-106; Schwarz Paradigm 199; Stutzman 57). Robert Orr illustrates the destructive results of short-sighted evangelism efforts. Research has shown that there are three major times in the first year when newcomers tend to leave. The first and largest of these drop-out times comes within the first eight weeks after joining. These drop-outs are usually new Christians who were the product of manipulative approaches to evangelism. “Research indicates that the method of evangelism has a great deal to do with the “fruit that remains” (6).

Perhaps the most effective way of making disciples is for existing Christians to focus on the *oikos* principle. *Oikos* is the Greek word for “household.” In the Greco-Roman world, *oikos* described more than just one’s immediate family. It included all of one’s sphere of influence including servants, servants’ families, friends, and business associates. Most people become Christians and enter the church through webs of relationship—common kinship, common friendship, and common association. The

effectiveness of this natural method of disciple-making is that it is the most fruitful way to reach people; it tends to reach entire families; and, it provides the most effective means of assimilating new members into the church, through the use of existing relationship (Arn 40-53; Neighbour 61).

One of the more common ways that the church can assist its members in evangelizing their *oikos* (relational network) is by providing a newcomer or membership class that clearly presents the Gospel of Christ. “Let’s not assume that everyone who indicates a desire to become a member of the church has already become a Christian” (Heck 16).

Discipleship: Establishing New Believers

Christian leaders have recognized the importance of spiritual formation for new believers and have acknowledged that the church must greatly improve in the area of new Christian follow-up (Mead 50-51; Moyer 348). But none has stated it as clearly as Wesley, “How dare you lead people to Christ without providing adequate opportunity for growth and nurture. Anything else is simply begetting children for the murderer” (Merrill 39). Three basic formats summarize the variety of ways that local churches have offered nurturing for new and growing Christians: classes, small groups, and one-to-one discipleship.

New Believer’s Class

Many congregations have had great success with a special class for new believers. Often this is a short class that is repeated several times a year, or it may simply be on-going and the lesson topics recycle every two or three months. The danger of the class format is that it can become too focused on academic content and curriculum rather than relationships (Coleman Disciplemaking 149-152; Merrill 46; Stutzman 63). The key to successful nurture of new believers is relationship (Stutzman 59). Warren states that “believers grow faster when you provide a track to grow on” (335). But he also acknowledges that Christians need relationships in order to grow and that believers develop best in the context of fellowship (338-339).

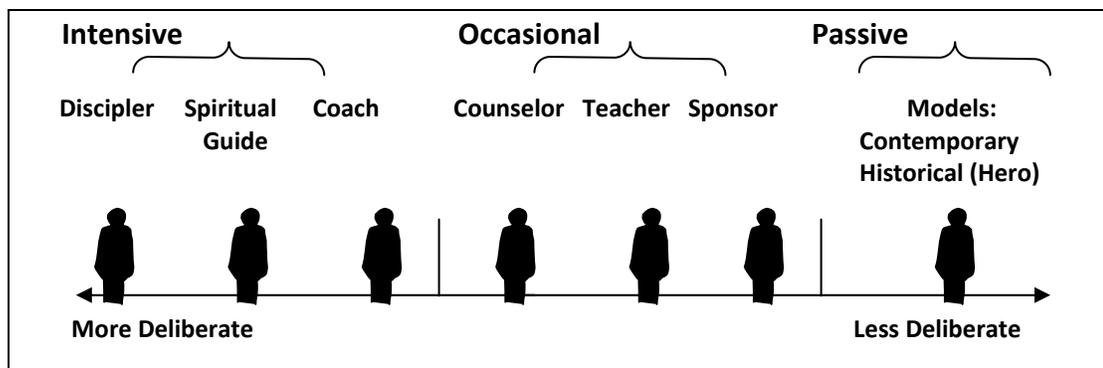
Small Group and One-to-One Discipleship

“Balanced discipleship takes place in the ongoing, nurturing environment of accountability provided by the cell group” (Slaughter 75). One of the most successful models of small group discipleship was that of early Methodism. “Wesley’s genius invented the class meeting for adult training in discipleship. To this day, no better model of lay formation has been invented” (Mead 49). Jesus also employed a small group for the formation of the twelve apostles. He concentrated on just a few men. The world can only be transformed as individuals are transformed. During the middle of his second year of ministry, as he became increasingly popular, Jesus selected twelve men in whom he would invest the majority of his time. Within this group he selected an inner circle that included Peter, James, and John (Coleman Evangelism 24-26).

Bill Hull, author of The Disciple Making Church, promotes a holistic discipling process through an expanding network of healthy small groups within the local church.

He joins Coleman and others in stating that one-on-one discipling by itself is inadequate to bring another believer to maturity in Christ, the whole body is needed. Ultimately, however, there is a place for one-on-one discipling if it is within the context of the larger body of the church (35; Disciplemaking 144).

Many authors have begun to look at discipling in the context of mentoring (Hull 35; Frying 8; Hawkins 39; Krallmann 122; Stanley 42). Clinton and Stanley define mentoring as a “relational experience through which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources.” It creates a positive dynamic that enables people to develop potential” (12). There are three categories of mentoring relationships: Intensive mentoring (more deliberate) includes a discipler, spiritual guide, and coach; occasional mentoring includes a counselor, teacher, or sponsor; and passive mentoring (less deliberate) which includes either contemporary or historic models (Stanley 41).



Mentoring can take place in a group; however, it is primarily a life-to-life experience. Mentoring in small groups lacks individualized contact that may minimize application and the experiential aspects of discipling. Also, group discipling requires that everyone in the group do all the same things on the same time schedule even if they have different needs, motivations, and abilities (Stanley 208-209).

Whether in a small group or one-to-one, the key principle of Jesus’ approach to discipleship is suggested in Mark’s statement that Jesus selected the twelve apostles, “that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). “Over the next twenty months, Jesus provided his newly appointed disciples constantly and consistently with opportunities to share in his life and ministry” (Krallmann 52). The early church continued Christ’s pattern of gathering regularly to spend time together, learn from the Word of God, and do the work of God (Acts 2:41-42; 9:18; 20:7, 26-27, 32). The process of assimilation was enhanced by one-to-one and group discipling as these new believers united around a shared “cause” (Saletri 30).

Fellowship and Community

Research has identified that a disproportionately large number of new members drop out of the church within the fifth and sixth month after joining. According to Orr, these newcomers did not find satisfaction in one or more of the following questions:

“Can I develop friends in this church?” “Where do I fit in?” “Am I needed?” (6). Churches are often initially friendly but don’t seem to follow through with the friendliness that was initially projected. “It’s almost as if newcomers have to sign up for future friends and wait for an opening.” This is largely the result of that fact that existing members who have been in the church for a couple of years or longer have all the friends and relationships that there is time and energy to handle. What can be done? (Anderson 136-137).

Assimilating new people into the church takes place naturally when you assist them in developing a circle of friends, joining a group or class, and finding a meaningful way to serve others (McIntosh Exodus 146; Martin “Incorporation”; Orr 6; Schaller Assimilation 76-77). Hunter illustrates the urgent need for vital Christian fellowship, “my interviews with people who once believed (but now believe no longer), reveal that people who drop out of the church are vulnerable, in time, to the breakdown and loss of faith—because Christianity is a communal faith” (Unchurched 48).

Small group involvement should be one of the first concerns of the church for its new members. It is also important to remember that new members often find it easier to become active in new groups rather than trying to break into existing groups (Arn 154; Schaller “Networks”; Towns 231). The most effective way to help new people make friendships in the church is to connect newcomers with newcomers in new groups. Newcomers usually have the desire, ability, time, and energy to develop new relationships (Anderson 136-137). Slaughter states, “We have found that people can find their way quickly out the back door of the church, if they don’t become established in a small group after the process of membership. People stay in a church because they find fulfillment through significant relationships and responsibilities. Relationships are not formed in a crowd!” (Slaughter 74).

Hunter indicates that some congregations, which he calls “new apostolic churches” are rediscovering that “a fulfilling experience in the Church” requires involvement in both corporate worship and the small group (Unchurched 48). Howard Snyder affirms the value of small groups for today’s high-tech society. Without them he believes that church members will miss “true, rich, deep Christian soul-fellowship, or koinonia.” He suggests that most churches of today need to rediscover what the early church knew: “Small group meetings are essential to Christian experience and growth” (150; Hunter Unchurched 48; Comiskey Harvest 97).

Personal Ministry

Finding a meaningful place of service answers the third and final question asked by new people within the church, “Am I needed?” (McIntosh Exodus 146; Martin “Incorporation”; Orr 6; Schaller Assimilation 76-77). It is critical for newcomers to become involved in the church’s ministry as quickly as possible. Otherwise, until newcomers assume some ministry responsibility, they won’t feel emotionally part of the church. They will think of the church in terms of “them” rather than “us” (Ratz 45). How soon should the church involve new people in service? One church determined to offer church responsibilities to newcomers by their third or fourth visit (Bird 123).

User friendly churches champion involving people in real ministry. They avoid becoming ingrown, focusing on the needs and concerns of current members. Instead, they value mobilizing people for ministry that is outreach rather than inreach focused (Barna 46). These user friendly churches have a much higher level of volunteer involvement. The key to this large pool of laborers is communicating the New Testament principle of servanthood and the responsibilities that followers of Christ have. Ministry in these churches is understood as a give and take proposition (Barna 162). “The pastor had best not do anything that the body itself could do. The pastor’s primary task is to equip the body, not try to do everything for the laity” (Oden 156). The biblical emphasis is not on an “omnicompetent” clergyman but on a “multigifted” body of Christ (Ogden 75).

To be a servant of Christ means getting in the trenches of ministry and doing what needs to be done to further God’s kingdom—using the gifts God has given us. To be part of the church means to accept the responsibility to be a minister on behalf of the church. It also means that the church has the responsibility to help its members discover their gifts and help them find the right place of service (Barna 162-163). Every member needs to find a ministry. At Saddleback Community Church members are assisted in selecting a personal ministry by first discovering their unique SHAPE: S = Spiritual gifts; H = Heart; A = Abilities; P = Personality; E = Experiences (Warren 370). Having the right people in the right place determines 60 to 80 percent of the success of any organization (Maxwell 153). Also, people should spend 80 percent of their time doing the things that require their greatest strengths and abilities (Maxwell 90). To assist new people in finding the best fit, a church can provide a “Christian Service Counselor” who can help match their strengths with ministry opportunities (Church Dynamics 17).

Once a ministry is selected, the volunteer is matched one-to-one with someone who is experienced in that ministry (Church Dynamics 17). The best way to equip people for ministry is “on-the-job training” (Church Dynamics 17; Slaughter 89; Warren 387). Ideally, every new lay minister will have the opportunity to serve as an apprentice to a layman who is skilled in the area of service they are seeking to learn (Garlow Partners 105).

The process of training lay people for ministry involves five distinct stages. First, association is simply being with the one you are training. “Effective lay ministry training begins with the bonding of a close relationship between the equipper and the one being equipped” (Garlow Partners 92). Second, impartation is the actual training—the “how-tos” of a particular ministry. The third stage is demonstration, where the lay person has the opportunity to watch the ministry being done successfully. Fourth, delegation is where the ministry is handed to the volunteer with a full sense of responsibility. The final stage is supervision. At this level accountability is established so that encouragement and assistance can be given as needed (Garlow Partners 92). Maxwell offers a similar five-step process for training people: Step 1, I model; step 2, I mentor (perform the task explaining the how and why of each step); step 3, I monitor; step 4, I motivate; step 5, I multiply (99-101).

Finding a way to fit into the structure of the local church is essential for new people who are joining the church. Those who find “secure and significant” places of service within the ministries of the church will not easily slip away (Stutzman 130).

Cell-Based Churches

As we move into the twenty-first century the largest and fastest growing churches in the world are cell-based churches. Their strategy organizes the church around the cell group and worship celebration services (Comiskey Harvest 19-20). How is a cell-based church defined? Missionary and researcher Joel Comiskey states that a cell-based church is “a church that has placed evangelistic small groups at the core of its ministry.” Cell group ministry is not just another program, it is the very heart of the cell church (Explosion 17). Because cell-based churches work with a distinctly different paradigm, the literature for this type of church will be reviewed separately.

Cell Groups Defined

Cells are evangelistic small groups that meet weekly to build up and edify Christians and reach non-Christians. “The ultimate goal of each cell is to multiply itself as the group grows through evangelism and then conversions. This is how new members are added to the church and to the kingdom of God” (Comiskey Explosion 17). A cell group is, “a group of people (five to 15) who meet regularly for the purpose of spiritual edification and evangelistic outreach (with the goal of multiplication) and who are committed to participate in the functions of the local church.” Those who attend the cells are also expected to attend the worship celebration services. The three major components of all cell groups are: “seeking God” through worship, prayer, and a study lesson; “developing relationships” with one another; and “reaching out” to non-Christians through friendship evangelism, special cell activity, and cell multiplication. In one cell-based church, only the small groups that include spiritual growth and evangelistic outreach are allowed to be called cell groups (Comiskey Harvest 109-110).

Attraction and Evangelism

In cell-based churches the primary concern is cell-group evangelism that results in cell multiplication. The vision of each cell is to be outward focused, not inward focused. Fellowship within the cell is always present, but it is not the primary goal. “Static, non-growing cell groups are simply unacceptable... Reaching out to unbelievers and penetrating the neighborhood with the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the rallying cry of each cell group” (Comiskey Harvest 48).

In the cell-based church, evangelism and discipleship are shared with the entire church through the cell groups. Cesar Castellanos, Pastor of the International Charismatic Mission (ICM) in Bogota, Columbia, argues that “only the cell structure will harvest thousands upon thousands of souls and convert church spectators into active members” (Comiskey Groups 43). Perhaps the best example of this in North America is Bethany World Prayer Center (BWPC) in Baker, Louisiana. Since establishing cells as the base of the church in 1993, the church has experienced record growth year after year. From 1994 to 1998, BWPC registered over 5,000 conversions through cell groups alone

(Comiskey Harvest 41). BWPC “has learned the hard way, through experience, that evangelism is best accomplished through relationships in small groups rather than through big events” (Comiskey Harvest 68).

Cell-based churches easily take advantage of the *oikos* principle—reaching each individual’s network of friends, co-workers, classmates, neighbors, and relatives (Arn 41-44; Neighbour 61).

The word [*oikos*] is found repeatedly in the New Testament, and is usually translated ‘household.’ However, it doesn’t just refer to family members. Every one of us has a ‘primary group’ of friends who relate directly to us through family, work, recreation, hobbies, and neighbors. ...Newcomers feel very much ‘outside’ when they visit your group for the first time, unless they have established an *oikos* connection with one of them. If they are not ‘kinned’ by the members, they will not stay very long or try very hard to be included before they return to their old friends (Neighbour 61).

David Yonggi Cho is pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea, the largest church in the world. He says that “meeting practical needs,” is the reason his church has been so successful in attracting new people. The cell leaders and members are taught to “find a need and meet it” (59).

We have 50,000 cell group and each group will love two people to Christ within the next year. They select someone who’s not a Christian, whom they can pray for, love and serve. They bring meals, help sweep out the person’s store—whatever it takes to show they really care for them. When a person asks, ‘Why are you treating me so well?’ Our people answer, ‘Jesus told us that we’re supposed to do good to all men, and we want you to know that we love you, and so does Jesus.’ After three or four months of such love, the hardest soul softens up and surrenders to Christ (George 94).

Cincinnati Vineyard Community Church provides an excellent example of mobilizing small groups for outreach to non-Christians. Every four to six weeks each of the small groups of the church engages in what they call “servant evangelism” (Hunter Unchurched 116-117). Pastor Steve Sjogren believes that the gospel needs to be proclaimed in both words and actions. The church has been known to give out free soft drinks at Bengal football games, clean car windshields, feed parking meters, rake leaves, mow lawns, shovel snow, and even clean toilets in local businesses. Instead of accepting donations they offer the simple explanation: “We just want to show God’s love in a practical way” (Hunter Unchurched 144).

Follow-up of Visitors and New Believers

Cell ministry effectively blends evangelism and discipleship. “A ‘built-in’ follow-up system is already in place through the cells.” Those who receive Christ in the cell are encouraged to attend the celebration services with their new cell family members (Comiskey Explosion 83). “Cell leaders and members know their work isn’t complete

until the convert becomes a responsible church member.” They are patient, yet persistent, recognizing that identification with the mother church can take time for a new convert who naturally feels more comfortable with their friends in the small group” (Comiskey Harvest 69).

The cells also provide effective follow-up of visitors and new converts that have entered the church through the worship celebration services or other larger events. Cell churches implement systems so newcomers who aren’t in a cell don’t “fall through the cracks.” Visitor cards are collected in the church services and distributed to the various cell groups, who in turn contact the newcomers. Through this organized approach many visitors begin to attend a cell. The church continues to track newcomers to ensure that they receive proper follow-up and care (Comiskey Explosion 72).

In the past Bethany World Prayer Center saw many people come to faith in Christ, but their follow-up program was awkward and ineffective because there was not relational connection with the new converts. The volunteers who did the follow-up focused their attention on the “newest converts” from each week’s previous Sunday. As a result, people continually fell through the cracks. However, employing the cell structure drastically improved follow-up:

When an individual comes to the Lord in a service, a cell leader stands behind that person at the forefront of the altar. After prayer, the new believer is led upstairs to our District Offices and greeted by a person acting much like an airline agent greeting an arriving flight. The person is asked for his or her zip code, then directed with the cell leader/counselor into one of seven District Offices based upon that person’s address. The new believer views a short video on Bethany and cell life and is then introduced to the appropriate Zone pastor. The person gets “Jesus” and “cells” at the same time. New believers have no built-in bias against cells, but are thrilled to have a support group and spiritual family to help them in their new walk (Stockstill 28-29).

If a friend who already attends a cell group has brought the new believer then he or she is assigned to that group. The objective is to form a relationship and complete the new believer follow-up in the context of the cell (Stockstill 29).

Personal Ministry

Each cell carries a “shared responsibility” for all the function of church work: pastoral care, follow-up of new believers, helping at services, praying for missionaries, and helping in the church outreaches. Each cell administers a spiritual gift analysis and helps its members find an appropriate place of service in the church (Stockstill 29). An example of “shared responsibility” can be seen each week at the public services of BWPC. The church’s cell ministry is divided into 7 “Districts” comprised of 14 “Zones.” The 14 Zones rotate responsibility so that each Zone is responsible for serving one week at the church then they are off for 13 weeks. The Zone members provide ushering, greeting, parking, altar work, nursery work, intercession, and any other needed ministries. There are a core of faithful workers in each of these areas of ministry that

choose to serve weekly with the rotating Zone members. Stockstill says that with this process “no one is burned out: the work proceeds forward with joy as everyone gets his or her “turn” at serving (44).

ICM estimates that it keeps the majority of new converts because of its follow-up and training program (Comiskey Explosion 64). “We’ve discovered how to train each person rapidly...It takes more or less six months from their conversion until they become a cell leader” (Comiskey Groups 65). They have the declared goal of transforming every new convert into a dynamic cell leader (Comiskey Harvest 53). BWPC shares this philosophy and has adapted the ICM training model for North America by using the image of a baseball diamond to communicate the “track” that is being laid out for the new believers. These churches use the home as the primary meeting place for the cell groups but provide the training at the church” (Comiskey Harvest 54).

First Base: Water Baptism and Cell Attendance.

After a person makes a commitment to Christ at a public service a pastor and cell leader will attempt to visit the new believer’s home within 24 hours to invite that person to the nearest group. Their goal is to get the person to make a public profession of faith in Christ through water baptism and encourage cell attendance during the first week after conversion (Stockstill 87; Comiskey Groups 66-67).

Second Base: Pastoring.

The new believer heads toward second base by first completing a six lesson study booklet called Christianity 101. This is done in the context of the cell (Hornsby 3-4; Stockstill 87). The final step toward second base is to attend an Encounter Retreat. The purpose of this retreat is to bring freedom to new converts in the areas where they struggle with “baggage” from the past. The three-day weekend retreat uses a combination of large group lectures and small group discussion and application (Bethany Between 5; Stockstill 88; Comiskey Groups 67-71).

Third Base: Preparing.

New Believers are urged to enter the “preparing stage” by taking a 12-week class called “Discipleship 201” that is held beginning on the Wednesday evening following the Encounter Retreat. At the end of this class participants are enrolled in an Saturday morning seminar called “Discovery Seminar.” Here believers are enabled to find an effective place of ministry in the local church through a discovery of their spiritual gifts, talents, and personality (Bethany Between 35; Bethany Discipleship 4; Stockstill 89; Comiskey Groups 72-73; Comiskey Explosion 64-65).

Home Plate: Planting.

After four months of initial follow-up a new believer is now ready to begin serious training for cell leadership. Each of the 12 classes is taught by the very best staff leader that the church has for that particular area using the booklet, Leadership 301 (Bethany Leadership 4; Stockstill 90-91). After the new believer has completed all the components of this seven-month follow-up and training process they are invited to a

Champions Retreat held at a local hotel from Friday evening through Saturday noon. At the conclusion on the retreat the pastors lay hands on the participants and consecrate them for cell leadership. Then on Sunday, during the worship service, these individuals are publicly recognized and released for cell ministry (Bethany Between 47; Stockstill 91; Comiskey Groups 72-73; Comiskey Explosion 64-65).

“Cell ministry is the most effective way to close the church’s back door. Cell ministry grows pew-sitters into pastors who care for the flock. New believers are converted into leaders who continue the process” (Comiskey Harvest 70).

Conclusion

The literature has revealed a great variety in how churches have sought to attract and assimilate newcomers. However, Warren restates one of the most foundational assimilation issues, “As Christians we’re called to *belong*, not just *believe*” (105).

Though characteristics of an assimilated person and requirements for church membership vary, assimilation literature raises and addresses the following elements in some form: attracting, retaining, joining, discipling, belonging, and serving. “The church is called to teach, baptize, welcome strangers, care for the sick, and preach the gospel to all the earth (Acts 1:8 and Matt. 28:19).” This will not occur without structure and direction. “It has to be organized and guided” (Oden 159). How should the church be structured and organized to fulfill the Great Commission by effectively reaching and assimilating non-Christians in North America in the 21st century?

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